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FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
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INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000416

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/26/2019

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SUBJECT: HELMAND GOVERNOR SEES SOME PROGRESS BUT BLAMES
PRESIDENT,S GOVERNING STYLE FOR PROVINCE,S OVERALL WOES

REF: KABUL 383

Classified By: Acting DCM Robert J. Clarke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) En route to a visit in the UK, Helmand Governor Mangal met with the Ambassador on 17 February to provide an update on developments in his province. He was especially pleased with progress on the counter narcotics front as well as with the continuing, positive effects being felt in Garmsir district as a result of last year's Marine Expeditionary Force deployment. On security, the Ambassador sketched out plans for the stationing of additional U.S. forces in Helmand and asked for the governor's help in managing future civilian casualties incidents. Mangal suggested the key to avoiding such mistakes is good coordination, and he promised to do his part in that regard. The governor is continuing his efforts to identify cooperative Alizai leaders with whom he might work, but he has not managed to sideline local strongman and Karzai favorite Sher Mohammad Akhundzada (SMA). Mangal's relationship with the President has not improved; Karzai recently told a Helmand district governor that Helmand "is not part of my administration" but is "controlled by foreigners." For his part, the governor attributes many of Helmand's problems to the President Karzai's tendency over the past several years of trying to manage the province via personal relations instead of through the appointment of qualified officials.

Progress on Several Fronts

2. (SBU) The governor pointed to several positive developments. He indicated the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (being financed by the UK in certain districts in Helmand) is off to a good start in Garmsir, Nad Ali and Gereshk, with a rollout to a few more districts planned. He was pleased as well that reconstruction and development work has made progress in Garmsir following last summer's clearing operations by the Marine Expeditionary Force there. Even in Musa Qala, he said, he had been able to meet with large numbers of ordinary citizens (he claimed 3000) who want peace and a better future.

3. (SBU) Above all, though, he was pleased with the early results of this year's counter narcotics campaigning, including both Governor-Led Eradication (GLE) and Poppy Eradication Force (PEF) operations. He noted plans to expand the Food Zone (where only licit crops are permitted) in the future. Mangal rejected the widespread notion that poppy cultivation has dropped because of the high price of wheat (the wheat price was high last year too). He attributed the change instead to a broader and better public information and

outreach campaign (including the enlistment of more religious figures in the effort) and the distribution of improved wheat seeds. Because of this last in particular, it is no longer farmers themselves but anti-government forces who are actively resisting poppy eradication efforts. He suggested it remains important to find additional ways to help farmers in order to cement this trend. As to whether it is insurgents or landowners involved in the narcotics trade who are behind attacks, the governor maintained it is pointless to draw a distinction since they are so closely linked financially. Note: As of mid-February, over 1500 hectares of poppy had been eradicated in Helmand by the PEF, with another 200-300 hectares by GLE. The total area eradicated there last year over the entire season by both PEF and GLE was about 2600 hectares. End Note.

¶4. (C) For his part, the Ambassador said it remains unclear exactly how future U.S. counter narcotics efforts will be structured, but he suggested there might be some new elements in light of the new U.S. military deployments. Reducing poppy cultivation in Helmand will, in any event, remain a top U.S. priority. He applauded the governor's work to date, particularly his carrying through on eradication in areas where he had warned farmers last year that poppy cultivation would no longer be tolerated. This should give the governor's words added impact in the future.

Security Challenges Ahead

¶5. (C) The Ambassador cautioned Governor Mangal that this is likely to be a particularly "complicated" year, with more fighting, the elections and the realignment of international

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forces. He briefly described the anticipated U.S. military deployments, focused particularly on cutting off reinforcement lines from Pakistan in southern Helmand and Kandahar provinces. He reminded Mangal that the governor has allies not only in Lashkar Gah but also at RC-South and ISAF headquarters. At the same time, he pointed out that despite best efforts to protect the Afghan people, international forces will inevitably make some mistakes. The Ambassador asked for the governor's help in managing the occasions when mistakes do occur.

¶6. (C) Mangal responded along two lines. First, he fully acknowledged that, with the increase in troops in Helmand, fighting will intensify. Nonetheless he welcomed the increase in troops because he believes the additional forces "will destroy terrorists." He noted with apparent satisfaction that, although "most" insurgents have returned for the moment to madrassas in Pakistan, when they return in the spring they will find themselves facing a larger countervailing troop presence. On the issue of civilian casualties, he did not really respond to the question of helping to manage the fallout but addressed instead the need to prevent them. He acknowledged that mistakes are ¶8 but at the same time suggested "we can prevent mistakes if we coordinate(I will always try to maintain good coordination so as to avoid mistakes."

Political Dynamics

¶7. (SBU) Asked whether he has made progress in identifying Alizai tribal leaders with whom he can work, Mangal responded only indirectly. He remains committed to his strategy of finding such people while also stressing the importance of more engagement with Alizais as a whole and bringing tangible improvements to their lives. He said he is considering what additional projects might be initiated in Alizai areas. Security, however, remains a formidable challenge. But as soon as the government has real control over Musa Qala, Kajaki and Baghran districts in northern Helmand, then such projects can go forward and will have a major impact. In this context, he noted that the military in Kajaki do not have a particularly good relationship with the local people.

In general, he lamented that many people continue to think only in terms of three Alizais as real influence-wielders) former governor Sher Mohammad Akhundzada, Mullah Salam in Musa Qala and Rais Baghrani in the province's northernmost district. He conceded that Baghrani has some influence with the Taliban but dismissed Mullah Salam as having no more than 5 percent support among locals. He has warned President Karzai that Salam cannot play any constructive role.

18. (SBU) Mangal's relationship with President Karzai does not appear to have improved. The governor insisted he tries to carry out the president's wishes in good faith but never hears from him. He recounted how a Helmand district administrator encountered Karzai at a recent event in Kabul and was asked where he came from. Responding that he was from Helmand, the president shot back that Helmand "is not part of my administration" but instead is "controlled by foreigners." Philosophically, Mangal commented that he tries to maintain a good relationship with President Karzai, but, he said, "I can't become a Sher Mohammed (Akhundzada)." The Ambassador suggested he should not try to do so.

Prospects for Elections

19. (SBU) Finally, Governor Mangal maintained -- though without citing specific evidence -- that interest in Helmand in the upcoming elections is well below the 2004 level. He laid the blame for this squarely at the doorstep of the central government. By failing to make good on its promises, he said, the authorities had lost the trust of the people. "We have been weak compared to the Taliban." He recounted that he had told the President that "we have destroyed Helmand as much as the Taliban have." When asked by President Karzai to identify the "we," Mangal said he pointed to the people Kabul has appointed as its representatives in the province) governors, prosecutors, chiefs of police, etc. We relied on relationships, he told the Ambassador, instead of on professionalism.

Comment

10. (C) The meeting provided a bit of balance to the often gloomy reports about Helmand, with the governor able to cite a number of notable, positive developments. His personal

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activism on counter narcotics has brought concrete results and makes him a model among Southern governors. His comments on preventing civilian casualties, the important role of coordination in this regard and the need for greater direct engagement with residents closely paralleled the comments of Helmand's MPs at a recent meeting with the British Embassy here (reftel). We will be surprised if Mangal's suggestion of low citizen interest in the upcoming elections holds, at least once candidates have been named. Worth noting, the recent, plus-up voter registration in Helmand equaled about 29 percent of the first voter registration five years ago; the average for all provinces is about 35 percent. Finally, it is clear from the governor's comments that he remains in office despite, rather than with the support of, President Karzai. Against that background, we find the competent Mangal's repudiation of the modus operandi frequently favored by the president in dealing with the provinces, namely working through personal relations rather than giving top priority to qualifications, especially telling) and on the mark.

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